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### Review of John Renard's Islam and Christianity

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Muslim-majority societies are indeed higher than in many Western countries, but they are not static and the authors suggest a significant convergence is in the making.

Youssef Courbage is a highly experienced demographer, well known among students of the Middle East for his work (jointly authored with Philippe Fargues) on *Jews and Christians under Islam* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), with its very interesting conclusion that the proportion of Jews and Christians in the Middle East during the Ottoman period went up significantly. It is a good combination, as the other significant theme of the book is the role played by religion in bringing about either high or low birth rates. Here too their conclusion is clear: "emphasis on Islam as a causative factor is primarily a symptom of intellectual myopia. Literacy, patrilinealism, reactions of minority groups, and oil wealth all reduce the idea of Muslim demographic specificity to the level of a residual variable" (p. 120).

There is thus no shortage in the book of data and statistics from across the wider Islamic world, but they are always helpfully contextualized, for example, in the observation that fertility rates in Iran and Tunisia are now the same as in France (p. xii). Regional variations are also stressed, together with such important factors as female literacy, pre-Islamic social patterns, the wider political scene, and, last but by no means least, economic issues such as poverty. Different perspectives within the Islamic tradition are also important, especially between Sunni and Shi'i views, with the interesting observation made on page 31 that Ryad al-Solh, the (Sunni) first prime minister of Lebanon, converted to Shi'ism because he had no sons and wished to be able to transfer his property to his daughters. Religious factors do make some difference but they are not necessarily the primary factor in these questions. Generally speaking, the authors suggest secularization is conducive to a decline in fertility since religion is commonly natalist. Freedom of choice in sexual and family matters has consequences in both the demographic and the political arenas, again potentially leading to convergence rather than conflict.

Overall, the book provides a healthy grounding in empirical reality to a debate that is too often focused exclusively on the realm of ideas. It may be that the authors overstate their case somewhat at one or two points, but the fundamental thesis is well argued.

JOHN RENARD, *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011). Pp. 344. \$60.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

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This book from an author who is well known for his studies on different aspects of Islamic spiritual experience takes his interests in a slightly different direction, toward the comparative study of the Islamic and Christian traditions, building on his formation as a Jesuit priest as well as his studies of Islam. It does so through an investigation of four dimensions of the two traditions: the historical (i.e., their origins, intellectual development and spread, and view of the consummation of history), the creedal (the theological narrative of history, the specific creedal formulations, the particular issues discussed, and some of the main thinkers and schools in each tradition), the institutional (the structures of authority in terms of religious leadership, law, political power, religious [i.e., monastic/Sufi] communities, educational institutions, and the visible structures of architecture and art), and the ethical and spiritual. Each topic covers two chapters, with the exception of the last, which contains three chapters.

A preface outlines the context within which the discussion takes place, particularly in terms of both American and European perceptions of "Islamic" threats to "Christian civilization," and then considers some of the challenges of a project of this kind: the breadth and timescale of the traditions involved (where the author makes clear his concentration on "classical" rather than "contemporary" material); how to select themes and material; how to undertake fair and even-handed comparison; and how to work within explicitly "theological" horizons. A prologue outlines four main avenues through which Christians have in the past sought to interpret Islam: the polemical model associated with John of Damascus, the scholastic model of Thomas Aquinas, the inclusivist model of Hans Kung, and the dialogical model of Kenneth Cragg.

An introduction then provides a helpful overview of the main themes and subdisciplines of the two traditions (for Christianity: biblical and exegetical theology, history and theology, systematic theology, and practical/pastoral/public theology; for Islam: Qur'an and *tafsir*, hadith, sacred biography and historical considerations, shari'a [law], themes in *kalām* [theology], and pastoral and mystical theology).

The author is kind enough to acknowledge the contribution of my own *Christians and Muslims: From Double Standards to Mutual Understanding* (Richmond, Va.: Curzon Press, 1995) in encouraging him to tackle this subject. His own treatment, however, while utilizing a structure that is similar at some points, provides considerably more detail, as well as some further contemporary reference in the light of obvious developments over the past decade and a half. Another author with whom comparison might usefully be made, though his works do not appear in the bibliography, is Frank Peters of New York University, whose various books cover some of the same ground but include discussion of the Jewish tradition as well as the Christian and Islamic traditions.

The main body of the book provides a huge wealth of detail on Christian and Muslim thought and life, which is almost certain to lead an open-minded reader to agree with the author in his statement at the start of the book that "the preponderance of historical data suggests that Islam and Christianity are, after all, not as incompatible as many readers might once have thought" (p. xv). The prologue and epilogue, however, seem to strike a slightly different tone, perhaps based on their origins, which are described on page xvi as "an expanded version of a plenary address delivered to the Catholic Theological Society of America in San Antonio in 1993." Compared with the admirably even-handed discussion in the rest of the book the material in these two sections appears a little unbalanced, simply on the basis of being addressed quite specifically to a Christian audience, as exemplified by the reference to "our" theological activity quoted above. This is a shame; while it is undoubtedly the case that many Christians need to know more about the Islamic tradition, it is also true that many Muslims need to know more about the Christian tradition, and it might appear that they are exempted from this requirement by the tone of the prologue and epilogue. It may simply be, however, that the author is indeed writing explicitly for a Christian audience.

At the end of the book, an epilogue reflects on the prospects for Christian-Muslim theological dialogue, and contains the interesting admission that "a decade into the new millennium, too much of our theological activity remains shockingly intramural" (p. 223). The author's proposed remedy for this situation is taking World Theology as outlined by Ross Peat and Edmund Perry as a model for the future, and he provides five reasons the development of this concept is essential, some pragmatic and some more "theological," with the final two pages offering the life of the Jesuit scholar Richard McCarthy (to whom, with the author's parents, the book is dedicated) as a model for this. There is a helpful five-page theological glossary of Arabic, Greek, German, Hebrew, Latin, and Persian terms, and then a bibliography and indices of subjects, names, and scriptural references.

Part II is perhaps the weakest of the book, partly because of some overlap with the discussion in the second chapter of Part I. And I noticed one small error in the bibliography, namely, that my own *A History of Middle Eastern Theologies* may have appeared in the publisher's catalogue for 2003 but, to my shame, it has in fact not yet appeared! Overall, however, the book is an admirable contemporary attempt to continue the efforts of the author's Jesuit forebears to promote interreligious understanding, as seen in the conversations they had with the Moghul emperor Akbar, which are illustrated on the front cover of the book.